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SUBJECT: MALDIVES UPDATE: UN ELECTION MISSION DELAYED AGAIN; ISLAMIC PARTY CRITICIZES PRESIDENT

REF: A. COLOMBO 0026

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a series of meetings on January 30, the Embassy learned that the Special Majlis considering constitutional reform has not yet resolved the section on transitional arrangements, because of disputes over whether President Gayoom should be allowed to run and whether a transitional government should be appointed to oversee the Presidential elections. The New Maldives group expressed concern about the ruling DRP party's attempt to discredit them and limit their candidate's access to state-run television and radio. They also expressed disappointment that India has not engaged on democracy issues in the Maldives. The Islamic Adhaalath party criticized President Gayoom for failing to address growing social problems such as drug abuse and for exploiting religious extremism to gain international support. They attributed growing extremism to the influence of radical ideas Maldivian youth read on the internet and the failure of the Maldivian educational system to teach Islamic values. The Foreign Minister told the Ambassador that he had asked the UN to delay the visit of the UN election assessment team from mid-February to mid-March so that the Constitutional Reform process would be complete by the time of the team's visit. Ambassador told all interlocutors that the U.S. had not taken a position on the question of an interim Government or whether Gayoom should be allowed to run again, but assured them the U.S. would continue to press all sides to support the creation of independent institutions such as an Elections Commission, an independent judiciary, an independent Civil Service Commission (so the President cannot force the bureaucracy to campaign for him), an independent media, and an independent police, so that these institutions can help ensure free and fair elections. End Summary.

New Maldives Express Concern About Ruling Party Tactics

¶2. (SBU) In a meeting with the "New Maldives" group consisting of the former Foreign Minister, Justice Minister, and Attorney General the three expressed concern about tactics the Government is using to try and discredit them in advance of the Presidential election campaign. They alleged that the Government had accused New Maldives of terrorist plotting on an island none of the three had even visited. The President had also accused opposition parties of being behind the stabbing attempt against him (ref A). The Presidential spokes person went further, alleging that "a opposition alliance" was behind the attempt. This was a

clear reference to New Maldives in the view of its three leaders. The New Maldives leaders also complained that state-run T.V. and radio where providing exclusive coverage for the President's campaign-style travel around the country, while providing no coverage whatsoever for the speeches and visits of the New Maldives candidate Hassan Saeed.

13. (SBU) The New Maldives group was also concerned that two associates of the President had applied to register "the New Maldives movement" as an NGO in the Maldives to take this name away from New Maldives. Former Foreign Minister Shaheed said he had received a clear promise that the ruling party would not do this. He alleged that with the movement now registered the Government had threatened to arrest New Maldives members if they attempted to use that name. Shaheed said that New Maldives has now submitted an application for "The New Maldives Association" which he hoped would be approved. (Note: Ambassador subsequently raised this with the Foreign Minister - see para 16.)

14. (SBU) Asked for their assessment of the Special Majlis' progress on constitutional reform, the three leaders expected that the Special Majlis would be likely to complete its work by the end of February. They said there remains a major dispute about whether the President should be allowed to seek another term. At the same time they claimed Gayoom would be the easiest candidate to beat. They noted for example, that on a visit to the southern atoll of Adu the previous day, a far smaller number of islanders had turned out for the President's visit than a year earlier for a visit that the three ministers had helped to organize when they were in government.

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15. (SBU) The New Maldives leaders also alerted the Ambassador to a potential major new development, which was the possibility that the President's Finance Minister Ibrahim Qasim might split with the President to form his own party and possibly team up with MDP leader Munnavar who had been told by the MDP that he would not be the party candidate for President. Qasim's money and influence coupled with Munnavar's MDP support would make their new party a strong contender, Shaheed predicted. The Ambassador asked how many candidates would be allowed to stand in the elections. Shaheed responded that there could be as many as five to six candidates, from which the top two would compete in a run-off provided no candidate received 50 percent of the vote in the first round.

US For Independent Institutions

16. (SBU) Asked for his views on whether Gayoom should be allowed to run and the opposition's push for the appointment for an interim Government to supervise Presidential elections, Ambassador responded that U.S. had not taken a position on the question of an interim Government since it was hard to defend appointing an interim government to replace an elected one. He also said it was up to Maldivians to determine whether Gayoom should be allowed to run. The U.S. would, however, continue to press all sides to support the creation of independent institutions such as an Elections Commission, an independent judiciary, an independent Civil Service Commission (so the President cannot force the bureaucracy to campaign for him), an independent media, and an independent police. The U.S. also supports the visit of a UN team to assess what measures needed to be put in place to ensure a free and fair election.

India's Role Disappointing

17. (SBU) The Ambassador asked if the Indian High Commission in Male' and the Indian Government more broadly were engaging in any of these democracy issues given India's public support

for the democracy agenda in the UN and elsewhere. All three leaders responded that only the U.S., EU and UK were playing helpful roles. India had not engaged, which they said was "very disappointing".

First Ever Meeting with Islamic Party Adhaalath

¶8. (SBU) In the first ever meeting with the U.S. Embassy, Adhaalath party President Sheikh Hussain Rasheed Ahmed and Vice President Dr. Mauroof Hussain explained that they had registered Adhaalath as a political party to promote social justice in the Maldives. The two leaders claimed that the party has 6,000 members registered with the Election Commission, another 4,000 unregistered members, and offices on 35 islands in the Maldives. Sheikh Ahmed noted that Maldives faces significant social challenges, including rampant drug use by the majority of Maldivian youth, widespread corruption, and degradation of moral values such as the decline of respect by children for their elders. Sheikh Ahmed accused the present Government of not doing enough on any of these issues, which had led to the September bombing in Male and an increase in crime.

¶9. (SBU) Ambassador asked for their views on religious extremism in the Maldives. Sheikh Ahmed responded that his party is concerned about the rise of extremism in the Maldives, but that so far the extremists represent a minority. He attributed extremism to the Government's failure to understand and properly deal with the problem. When tensions rose more than a year ago on the island of Himandhoo, Sheikh Ahmed said he met with the Maldivian Chief of Police and urged that Adhaalath be allowed to talk to the disaffected youth on the island and that the Government not repress them. The Chief of Police refused, leading to the confrontation that had taken place in late 2007. The Ambassador asked why they thought the troubles had started in Himandhoo. Dr. Hussain said the troubles began when the Government decided to build a mosque on the site of a graveyard, which is forbidden in Islam. The people refused to worship in that mosque and opened their own unlicensed

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one, to which the Government objected.

¶10. (SBU) Both Adhaalath leaders accused President Gayoom of exploiting religious extremism, so that he can seek international support to fight it. The Ambassador reassured both leaders that while the U.S. opposes extremism everywhere, the U.S. was not supporting Gayoom or any other candidate in the 2008 elections. Rather, the U.S. supports a free and fair democratic process. The Adhaalath leaders welcomed the U.S. position and characterized the present regime in the Maldives as the country's biggest hurdle. Dr. Hussain complained that no institutions are free, and that the Government controls the civil service and has "cronies" to run all the islands.

¶11. (SBU) The Ambassador asked where the support for extremism came from, particularly whether any foreign countries were providing support. The two leaders again sought to downplay the influence of extremists, pointing out that there is no organized extremist movement in Maldives. They said Maldivian youth are not receiving adequate Islamic education and are therefore easily influenced by extremist ideas they read on the internet. Both leaders accused President Gayoom of using Islam for the Government's objectives rather than for promoting Islamic values. The Ambassador asked if the Imams in the country's mosques dare speak up against the Government. Sheikh Ahmed said they do not because they are appointed by the Government and are afraid to lose their jobs.

¶12. (SBU) The Ambassador asked for Adhaalath's views on education in the Maldives. Both lamented that the Maldives has no recognized university, which forces students to go

overseas. They observed that most primary and secondary schools in the Maldives now teach in the medium of English. Only two schools have instruction in Arabic where both Islamic and secular subjects are taught. These too are Government-run, but Dr. Hussain pointed with pride to the fact that students graduating from the Arabic medium schools were far less prone to drug use than their counterparts in secular schools.

Government Delays UN Assessment Team

¶13. (SBU) In a subsequent meeting with Foreign Minister Abdalla, the Minister told the Ambassador that he had written UN Under Secretary General Pascoe to delay the visit of the UN election assessment team from mid-February to mid-March so that the Constitutional Reform process would be complete by the time of their visit. The Minister expressed satisfaction that the majority of constitutional articles had been adopted with cross-party support. He was particularly pleased that the chapter on rights is "totally consistent" with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. For example, the new Constitution provides for the right of assembly without prior permission and contains strong provisions on press freedom, he said. The Minister noted that the Special Majlis was still debating the sensitive question of transitional arrangements prior to the elections.

Religious Freedom Challenge

¶14. (SBU) The Minister candidly divulged that he was not satisfied with the provision in the Rights chapter that every Maldivian must be a Muslim. He said this particular amendment would contravene obligations that Maldives had undertaken in joining several international conventions. Already, he said that the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion had written to express concern about this Amendment.

The Foreign Minister explained that he had already written the Special Majlis to reconsider this particular Amendment.

¶15. (SBU) With respect to the opposition's call for the appointment of a transitional government to supervise elections, the Minister said there was no justification for such a proposal. He questioned the rationale for appointing an unelected interim administration to replace a democratically elected government. He said that the Government was proposing that candidates for the Election, Civil Service, and other independent commissions be approved

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after consultation with all parties. These independent institutions could then supervise elections. Parliamentary elections would then be held within 6 months after the Presidential elections.

¶16. (SBU) The Ambassador repeated that the U.S. had not taken a position on the question of an interim government, but would strongly support the appointment of independent institutions to supervise and ensure free and fair elections.

He said that international judgments on the fairness of the elections would hinge in part on how free and impartial such institutions as the Election Commission, judiciary, and the media would be. He shared with the Minister opposition complaints that already that state-run T.V. and radio had blacked out all coverage of Hassan Saeed. Once the formal campaign began the Government would need to make a special effort to allow balanced coverage from all of the candidates.

The Ambassador also urged the Government to approve the New Maldives application to register "The New Maldives Association". To deny it would be petty and of no real benefit to the Government. The Minister agreed and thought the Association would be approved.

BLAKE